

# ***FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET***

**Meeting Date:** March 12, 2015

**Agenda Item:** Ash Coulee Conservation Easement

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Endorsement

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 minutes

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## **Background**

FWP proposes to purchase a perpetual conservation easement on 4,800 acres of deeded land northwest of Glasgow. Approximately 1,400 acres of the proposed easement are located along 11 miles of the Milk River, in addition to 3,400 acres of native grass and shrublands. The property, referred to as Ash Coulee, consists of two separate parcels located within 1 mile of each other. The ranch provides productive riparian, wetland, native shrub and mixed grassland habitats, all of which have been identified as state priority habitats. The area includes critical winter range for antelope and mule deer, and is part of the Sage Grouse Connectivity Core Area. The Milk River portion of this ranch includes important year-round habitat for ring-necked pheasants, turkeys, white-tailed deer, and many other resident wildlife species.

Ash Coulee lies adjacent to the FWP Vandalia Wildlife Management Area, Bureau of Reclamation property, publicly accessible DNRC land, two properties enrolled in Block Management, and the Buffalo Coulee Conservation Easement; when combined, these properties represent 8,914 contiguous acres of publicly accessible land. A conservation easement would protect healthy blocks of riparian and sagebrush habitats from conversion to other cover types, benefitting wildlife and agriculture, while also increasing public hunting and fishing opportunities.

## **Public Involvement Process & Results**

FWP has not sought any public comment at this time. Upon endorsement from the Commission, FWP would conduct appropriate analysis, public review processes, and negotiations.

## **Alternatives and Analysis**

Proposed Action: Purchase the 4,800 acre Ash Coulee Conservation Easement. FWP would develop a rest-rotation grazing system and riparian management to improve wildlife habitat while also securing permanent public access.

No Action alternative: FWP would forgo the opportunity to conserve and enhance valuable wildlife habitats with a willing private land partner. There would be no guarantee of public access to the property.

## **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

To conserve the high resource values and public recreation opportunities on this land, FWP recommends endorsement by the Fish & Wildlife Commission, allowing FWP to proceed with the further development of this opportunity.

## **Proposed Motion**

I move the Fish & Wildlife Commission endorse this conservation easement project, allowing FWP to initiate negotiations and to conduct analysis and associated public review.